

Interview with Keiko Kiyohara, the Mayor of Mitaka City

Elderly Citizens — Invaluable Human Resources for a City's Welfare

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Mitaka is one of the cities in the suburbs of Tokyo, well known for the Museum of Japanese Animation of Director Hayao Miyazaki, who created a number of attractive and well-known animation films such as *Spirited Away*, *Nausica of the Valley of the Wind* and *Castle in the Sky*. Surrounded by more greenery than the center of Tokyo, the city has a reputation for more active citizen participation in its administration than any other city in Japan.

Elderly citizens are no exception in this, and their example shows how a community can take advantage of the experience and wisdom of older people who are living longer and in good health thanks to the remarkable progress of medical science.

The mayor of Mitaka, Keiko Kiyohara, plays a key role in making Mitaka a city where elderly people are actively working for the interests of society. In an interview on March 7, 2017, she told us how we can empower elderly people as invaluable human resources in an aging society.

Introducing Mitaka

JS: Could you please briefly introduce yourself and tell us in particular what you are trying to achieve in your administration of the city?

Kiyohara: The city of Mitaka has just celebrated the 67th anniversary of its foundation. I am the sixth mayor of this city. Our goals for the administration which we have been pursuing consistently since its foundation are “achievement of peace”, “respect for human rights” and “realization of local autonomy”. We consider “citizen participation in local governance” and “collaboration between the city government and the citizens” as very important in achieving those three goals. We created “The Mitaka City Fundamental Ordinance of Autonomy” in 2006, defining “citizen participation in local governance” and “collaboration between the city government and the citizens”, and we are promoting now all kinds of policies with these two crucial principles. We always bear in our mind that we should partner with all the citizens in a wide range of opportunities. Let me introduce some symbolic events.

We make it a rule to ask citizens older than 18 years old selected



Keiko Kiyohara, the Mayor of Mitaka City

at random to join our “Town Management Discussion” on a certain day and present their specific views on any policy issue on this occasion. Whenever we work on construction projects such as a park or a school and on making general long-term plans, we try to collect as many opinions and views on them as possible from the citizens. In addition, we also select the members of the city government’s advisory council at random from among citizens so that the silent majority’s views can be well reflected in our policies.

There are, of course, people in their 70s or 80s included among those participating in the city’s governance as the council’s members or at any other opportunity.

JS: Mitaka City is well known for its active liberal movements in the second half of the 19th century in Japan. Is this

emphasis on citizen participation the root of local governance in Mitaka?

Kiyohara: Yes, that history may affect our governance a little. However, more importantly, this was started by Mitaka’s third mayor, Dr. Heizaburo Suzuki, who was thinking about harmonization between the longtime residents and the newcomers moving in due to

the rapid population increase in the 1970s. What we call “community-based administration” was established then. We now have a community center in each of the seven community residents’ areas. The first one was opened in 1978 and was run by an autonomous resident association comprising citizens selected from among those who applied by public subscription. This was almost the first case of citizens’ direct participation in local community governance in Japan.

In the late 1970s, all the cities, towns and villages in Japan were to create a “basic concept” for their local governance building requested by national law. Mitaka, in formulating specific plans along with the “basic concept”, set up a “town council” consisting of citizens to reflect the views of the ordinary people. I was the youngest member of this council then, a graduate student, one of those selected to reflect the views of young women in their 20s in the city’s administration.

Even 40 years before “The Mitaka City Fundamental Ordinance of Autonomy” defining citizens’ participation in local governance and collaboration between the citizens and local government was adopted, Mitaka started practicing it in advance.

Aging Society & Mitaka

JS: With this solid basis in democracy, Mitaka started thinking about addressing issues raised by the aging society. Is this why residents in Mitaka are getting increasingly grey these days?

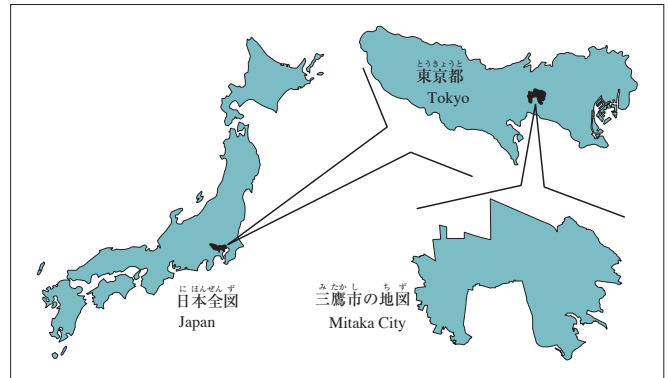
Kiyohara: No. In reality, there are a large number of younger families living in Mitaka, and the percentage of residents over 65 is still below the average all over Japan. But among all the cities in Japan, the male life span is longer than the average and Mitaka is one of those cities enjoying the longest such life span in Japan. We started thinking about the interests of elderly people, since there have been some who have played an important role in our civic activities and we have respected their contributions to our governance. There are around 100 neighborhood and community associations in Mitaka among which people in their 70s or 80s are very active as leaders. There are also active elderly executives among the seven community councils. I do not think this is bad. I say to those aged members as mayor, “It would be wonderful if you could play a responsible role in our society for your whole life, provided the stubbornness we often observe in elderly people does not create any trouble with others.”

In the past, we had four female presidents among those seven community councils. At this moment, we happen to have no female president. The oldest president is now 89 years old. Apart from age, if the head of the organization stays for so many years it could lose flexibility and vitality. I assume that all the community councils think about such demerits and try to avoid having their leaders stay as the heads for too many years.

On a different note, concerning the “Long-term Care Insurance

MAP

Location of Mitaka City



Source: Mitaka City

System” that began with the arrival of the 21st century, we believe that for the smooth administration of this insurance scheme it is crucial to prolong life in good mental and physical health, and not to have an increase in the number of aged people at the care need level and support need level. This has been shared with all the citizens in Mitaka since the introduction of this insurance scheme. I would like you to know that a “health diary” system to encourage self-management of health by each citizen had already been introduced in the 1970s, and a very high degree of collaboration among medical experts such as the associations of medical doctors, dentists and pharmacists has been working well to support this system. Our health experts work very hard on health checks, preventive care, and health guidance on specific diseases such as diabetes.

In addition, all the seven resident community councils are engaged in activities to promote health by physical exercise, such as walking at each community center. We have always advocated for the idea that elderly people can ideally continue to stay in their home town until their last moments. This is a goal shared by the whole of Mitaka. I have always said it would be beneficial for aged citizens to keep working and enjoying a prolonged life in good health and above all participating in social activities to promote our city’s welfare and prosperity. In November 2004, at my initiative, a “Local Care Network in the Mitaka region” was founded in the Inokashira area where the largest number of aged people in Mitaka were living.

This is a citizen-oriented human network loosely connecting all kinds of people with a keen interest in welfare services, including associations of doctors, dentists, pharmacists, members of the welfare commissioners, neighborhood associations and care supporters for the handicapped. With this network, the aged, the handicapped or people working on raising children can get together in the same venue and discuss civic welfare services. This would be expected to lead to improving the quality of welfare services provided by the city government.

This is a unique approach by Mitaka to promote local welfare systems by the citizens’ own efforts in addition to services like health



insurance, medical and welfare services for which the city government is responsible.

JS: Respecting diversity is certainly what our national government is now trying to pursue. Mitaka has been doing this for a long time by taking account of various views in promoting its policies.

Kiyohara: Yes, it is certainly true that the city government has been pursuing diversity in promoting its policies, but there are cases that show that citizens themselves are pursuing diversity in their activities after retirement.

The “Mitaka Silver Human Resources Center” is the first human resources center in Japan that is a public interest incorporated association. It aims to help people after their retirement to find new jobs. Anyone over 60 is eligible to be a member of this organization. The average age of the registered male members of the center is 73.6 years and the oldest member is 94. The average age of the female members is 72 and the oldest one is 91. The average age of those working actually is around 73. There are various jobs that can be offered to them. The most popular one is gardening. There are some people earning good money by gardening after having learned it by themselves after retirement. Other jobs include making sliding paper doors (*fusuma*), caregiving services, teaching children, and being a concierge for bicycle parking spaces or sports facilities. Another important job is delivering Mitaka’s public relations papers and letters from the city’s local parliament to all 92,000 households in the city. We have been doing this since 2003 when I was elected mayor.

On the other hand, “Club of the Aged” run by Mitaka Community Social Welfare Council has been engaged not only in art and culture promotion activities but also in daily volunteer work at the reception at Kyorin University Hospital in the city. They have also been working on arranging lectures on health maintenance by doctors working at Kyorin University or consultations or guidance on physical exercise to maintain health based on the outcomes of tests organized with the

help of professors and students at Japan Women’s College of Physical Education.

Both organizations also work on caregiving for elderly people. It used to be considered a tragedy that the elderly would have to work to help other aged people. But now, in our city, there are many older people who, if they are in good health, think caregiving for other aged people in need would be a means of self-fulfillment. They are all positive thinkers who are optimistic about the aging society.

We also have a “Local Care Network” which was started as a support activity for the aged, but recently there seems to be multi-generation interactions occurring within this network. For example, older people give advice to young mothers on how to take care of their children in cases of emergency. The network has thus become a venue for meeting and communicating between young parents raising their children and the elderly.

Elderly Supporting the Young

JS: It would be great if young people or children could learn lessons about life from elderly citizens.

Kiyohara: Yes. Certainly, in the case of Mitaka we have many examples of older people supporting the education of children. Many elderly citizens support teachers with some school courses for children in need of help as volunteers. In promoting primary and lower secondary school education in which the community collaborates, we organize exchanges of students between a junior high school and two or three neighboring elementary schools, in both course work and after-school activities and events. It is not only the school teachers but also the parents and the residents of the district who are involved in supporting those activities. People whose grandchildren are attending those elementary schools are in particular active in their contributions. We have more than 20,000 volunteer teachers in 15 elementary schools a year. We have also a civic hall for the children where older people teach them some Japanese board games such as Go or *shogi*. In addition, we have senior volunteers dubbed “school angels” who promote safety for pupils and watch over them on their way to school in the morning and coming home in the late afternoon. They belong to an NPO called “Senior SOHO Fukyu Salon MITAKA” consisting of members over 55 years old. The city government trusts them with this work.

JS: We need more daycare facilities today as women are encouraged to work rather than staying at home as mothers due to the shortage in the labor force. With elderly people’s support, could we compensate for the current shortage of daycare facilities?

Kiyohara: Yes. We have prolonged daycare from early in the morning until late in the evening in our public and private daycare facilities. In these cases, we ask retirees over 60 years old to support the full-

time child care persons for one or two additional hours to maintain security for these children. In Mitaka, there are offices for consultations on issues relating to children, including questions about child abuse. Elderly child care people are also working in those consultations. This is certainly encouraging for us, as these experts volunteer to continue to work for the interests of children.

Self-fulfillment for Elderly in Local Community

JS: In Japan, we often see retired men become suddenly depressed after leaving their company. But assuming they can live for many more years in good health after retirement, thanks to the progress of medical science, these working venues you mentioned would be ideal for them.

Kiyohara: Exactly. In Mitaka, we produced two brochures, one titled “Let’s Expand Our Human Network in Our Home Town for Mutual Support” and the other titled “A Guidebook for Mutual Support in Mitaka to Lead You to a Happy Life”. These aim to provide information on possible jobs for retired people who may be depressed and believe there is no place for them to work in their own region. Men who have worked for a company often put too much weight on their company life, rather than their family life, and often feel there is very little room for them to work in their home towns. Mitaka started promoting the concept of community in the 1970s to let them know that not only companies can be venues for self-fulfillment but their home towns also, where there are town meetings, residents’ associations, residents’ councils and other places where they could start playing sports or activities related to their hobbies.

JS: In thinking about working conditions for the elderly, the older they are, the shorter their possible working hours would have to be. Would this be an impediment for them?

Kiyohara: I think it would be possible to solve this problem. In the “Mitaka Silver Human Resources Center” we have a flexible working schedule depending upon personal capacity and time available. Some people work for three hours and others for four. Depending on the day of the week, some can work and some cannot. We can coordinate these different working schedules and achieve work sharing or time sharing. This is a key to the success of this working system.

It would be difficult for one single person to take all the responsibility but it would be possible for a team. A team leader can manage the whole work by thinking carefully about a member’s time schedule and his or her physical condition. They are occasionally even engaged in risk management by replacing someone in bad

physical condition with someone else. In allocating the working obligations for each member, they need to think about each member’s preferences too. A member’s earnings would depend upon the content of the work as well as the frequency. The whole system can be managed by fairness as well as in the spirit of mutual support among the members. In managing work sharing among aged volunteers, there should be a consensus among the members that a job opportunity is to be assured in accordance with their competency and efforts. This is a principle of fairness to be respected by the community.

If you are competent in information and communication technology (ICT), you can be qualified as a team leader who could work on job assignments for the members. Therefore, it is important for aged people to learn about ICT. We organize lectures on ICT for the elderly and the handicapped to encourage them to participate in any social activity. In this sense, ICT is truly useful for promoting autonomy for the aged.

In observing these volunteers activities, I think once you start an activity you would feel like trying another one. This is how elderly people can become increasingly positive about life.

Future of the Aging Society in Mitaka

JS: What is your vision of the future of Mitaka?

Kiyohara: We have to think about how long we can prolong a life span in good health rather than a simple life span, which is I guess a key challenge not only for Mitaka but also for Japan overall. In order to increase the number of elderly people in good health and autonomy in Mitaka, we will start our new project in fiscal 2017 to help the elderly strengthen their muscle power in collaboration with Kyorin University Medical Department Hospital, as well as promoting preventive care as we have done so far.

Above all, mental health and vitality will be a key to achieving a long life span in good health, I believe. We will produce as many programs as possible for older people to join at our Lifelong Learning Center or Comprehensive Health Care Center. I believe that by participating in those activities, older people could make good friends and be motivated to live longer in good health, so I hope as many as possible will join our programs. Since we have been pursuing peace and respecting human rights, as I mentioned at the beginning, the rights of the elderly must be respected as well, and so we must try to provide whatever they may want as a local administration, such as any volunteer activity or any art or culture or sports activity.

I hope these services will contribute as much as possible to creating a society where the elderly can enjoy mental and physical health for a long time. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Naoko Sakai who is a freelance writer.